The High Desert Museum

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Basque Boardinghouses

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Before beginning a new life as a herder or housekeeper in the High Desert, a young man or woman had first to span an ocean and a continent. The trans-Atlantic crossing and ensuing train ride traversing America took place in a land whose geography, customs, language and cuisine were unfamiliar and at times intimidating. As the transcontinental railways deposited young Basques at their final railway destination—perhaps Elko, Shoshone, or Alturas—the dry desert wind that greeted them also carried a flurry of new experiences to surprise them: buckaroos in chaps, cowpokes in stiff-

brimmed Stetsons, and Mexicans, Chinese, and Native Americans in traditional dress, all of whom were speaking in a strange language.

However, luckier Basques were greeted with the familiar sound of their native tongue. To the newly arrived herder, housekeeper, or family member who had just endured a long and most likely lonely journey, someone shouting "*Euskaldunak emen badira?*" ("Are there any Basques here?") must have been a very welcome sound and sight. Because train rides arriving from the east were few in number and fairly reliable, *hoteleros* (hotelkeepers) often made it their habit to send a relative or co-worker over to the station to greet the train and escort the newcomer back without complication. In towns where the *ostatuak* (boarding houses) were well-known throughout the region or when the hotel stood across the street from the train station in plain view, like the Landas boardinghouse in Ogden, Utah, for example, the courtesy of sending greeters was not followed.

Upon entering the boardinghouse, the traveler was once again surrounded with the familiar. Whether it was The Martin in Winnemucca, Nevada, Letemendi's in Boise, Idaho, or Osa's in Burns, Oregon, the sojourner found his or her language spoken, familiar food and drink as well as a hotelkeeper who was likely to make the transition from Old World to New as smooth as possible.

In the *ostatuak*, the newcomer discovered a number of provided conveniences. In some instances, *hoteleros* arranged employment for herders and then sent for them in the Old Country. If a Basque did not have a job upon arrival, the hotelkeeper was likely to set about in search of work for him in the community, on a neighboring ranch, or with a sheep outfit in the area. In the meantime, the hotelkeeper extended liberal credit, room, and board in exchange for the newcomer's future business and eventual repayment.

Basques traveling from one hotel to another between 1890 and 1920 would have noticed that the physical layout of the *ostatua* throughout the American West was fairly consistent. The larger boardinghouses in sizeable towns were usually two-story buildings with kitchen, bar, dining hall, and card or parlor rooms occupying the first floor. Private quarters for the hotelkeeper and his family were often found near the first story near the kitchen, toward the back of the building. The second and possibly third stories contained dormitory-style rooms for boarders and hotel employees. Bathing facilities were most often found at the front and back of long hallways that halved the upper floors. Breezes, the direction of sunlight, and street and kitchen noises often affected room selection. Long-term boarders usually took the favored rooms, leaving the others to the less frequent visitors. In more recent decades, some *ostatua* also offered individual rooms with wash basins.

If exploring the lower floor or cellar of the boardinghouse, the newcomer might have discovered storage areas for food-stuffs, a wine cellar, a tool shed, and an area where Basque sausages and other meats were salted and dried. Outside, along one side of the building, there might have been a handball or *jai alai* court for weekend afternoon tourneys. And, alongside the other exterior walls, there might have been a vegetable garden, a stable for boarders' horses, and a livery.

Of course, there are also examples of smaller one-story and two-story boardinghouses throughout the West. In Ontario and Crane, Oregon, for example, there was only one comparatively compact *ostatua* in town, and each were residences turned into boardinghouses. The *ostatua* operated by the Uberuagas on Grove Street in Boise,

Idaho, is the most well-known example of this phenomenon. In recent years it became the first Basque Museum in the United States. And, finally, there are also numerous examples of Basque families who "took in boarders" throughout Basque-American communities in the West.

Single male Basques who had come to North America to work in the burgeoning sheep industry comprised the majority of *ostatuak* boarders. Thus, the seasonal nature of the sheep industry dominated the workings of the Basque boardinghouses. In the summers, while on the high mountain ridges of the Owyhees, Sierra Nevadas, or Rockies, for example, a herder might individually tend up to a thousand ewes and lambs, but in the fall, lambs were sold, and the remaining ewes were grouped into winter bands. Consequently, about one half of the herders were released until the next lambing season, and many came into town, rented rooms in the *ostatuak*, and began looking for additional work. Whether they were on the range or in boardinghouses, herders used the *ostatuak* as their permanent mailing address and as a storage facility for their Sunday suit and extra gear. Many a hotel set a room aside for storing bedrolls, suits, camping gear, dated mail, and personal papers. Moreover, if a herder was injured on the job and needed to recuperate, his boss was likely to send him to the nearest Basque hotel for care. Finally, upon retirement, many elderly herders made the boardinghouses their home.

In addition to providing a family-like atmosphere for the bachelor herder and becoming the herder's home away from home, the *ostatuak* served other important functions for Basque-American families. Wives living on remote ranches would come to stay at the hotels during the last stages of their pregnancies and frequently gave birth there. Not uncommonly, outlying Basque ranchers sent their children to the hotels to board during the school year. Moreover, special occasions such as marriages, family celebrations, dances and wakes often took place in the *ostatuak.* For example, many Basques report that all local Basques were expected to gather at their favorite boardinghouse to help their friends and family celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and good news.

Basque hotelkeepers also welcomed and hired young women who came from the Old Country to work as serving girls and housekeepers. Oftentimes, once a herder had established himself financially in America, he began to look for a potential wife among these serving girls. Thus, the *ostatuak* provided the members of the Basque community with a place for meeting and courting. Many a Basque-American will recall meeting his or her prospective bride or husband in the dance halls, card parlors, and handball courts of their local boardinghouse. This occurred so frequently throughout the Great Basin and American West that experts have referred to the *ostatuak* as Basque "marriage mills."

Often Sunday was the day to visit the local hotel. Basques from outlying areas packed up their families and, depending upon available transportation, made their way to their favorite *ostatua.* There they might share a Sunday meal, cheer a handball or *jai alai* match, play a few rounds of *mus*, a card game, or attend a dance. For many hotelkeepers, Sunday was both dreaded and anticipated, for it was the most profitable day of the week and yet required the most intense work. As one *hostelera* stated, "Sundays were our best days but they were also our toughest."

Whether a new arrival or an oldtime friend, Basques and Basque-Americans came to rely on their favorite *ostatuak* as "home away from home," for they provided familiar Old World culture, language, food, and customs in a new setting. The 12 boardinghouses

found in Boise in 1922, or the seven found in Los Angeles in 1910, or the 17 different *ostatuak* that sprang up in Stockton between 1900 and 1950, or the hundreds of others were all part of a critical chapter in Basque-American history—one which provided a place for newcomers in the American West to ease their transition into new surroundings while still maintaining ties with their Basque homeland.